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SUBJECT: S/CT URBANCIC DISCUSSES CHECHNYA WITH DEPUTY
POLPRED

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Daniel Russell: 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Russia's Deputy Presidential Representative to the Southern Federal District briefed Deputy S/CT Urbancic on Chechnya, placing it solely in the category of a terrorist conflict. Recognizing that mistakes were made by the GOR, he noted the importance of economic opportunity and the re-establishment of local organs of government to turning the terrorist tide, encouraged reliance on local forces, and emphasized the need to demonstrate that terrorism was a "path to nowhere." He welcomed further consultations with Urbancic, and coordinated efforts with the US and Europe to combat terrorism. End Summary

¶2. (C) On October 13, S/CT Deputy Director Frank Urbancic met with the Deputy Presidential Representative to the to the Southern Federal District, Suleyman Gelaniyevich Vagapov, to discuss counter-terrorism lessons learned from the evolving conflict in Chechnya and terrorist acts in the North Caucasus. Vagapov, who volunteered that he was an ethnic Chechen, provided a personalized account of the Chechen wars that strictly adhered to the Russian government's version of the conflict. According to media reports, Vagapov was appointed Deputy to Presidential Representative Dmitriy Kozak in 2005. Before that, he was Chief Federal Prosecutor for the Southern Federal District.

Chechnya: Terrorists, not Insurgents

¶3. (C) Urbancic, noting that terrorism was a multifaceted challenge that required the tools of counter-insurgency to address successfully, asked Vagapov if there were areas of US-Russian cooperation and information-sharing that could be expanded. Vagapov welcomed his visit and the opportunity to discuss this theme, noting that he was involved in decisionmaking on the ground in Chechnya since 1999, when he helped reestablish local organs of power. While recognizing that there can be a grey area between rebels/insurgents and terrorists, Vagapov stated that Chechnya was a "terrorist" conflict and emphasized the miseries endured over the last 15 years by the local population, none of whom had been asked by the terrorists whether they wanted to live as part of Russia or not. From a highly educated populace that enjoyed many social benefits from the Soviet period, Chechens were thrown back into the Middle Ages and "broken" as a people.

¶4. (C) The GOR's success, Vagapov explained, was in reestablishing all local branches of government, adopting a constitution, and holding a referendum that reaffirmed the population's commitment to remain within Russia. The problems that still exist, he maintained, reflected the fact that terrorism in Chechnya had roots in what was taking place far removed from the Caucasus. The spread of internationalized terrorism made Chechnya a problem that required international solutions. What was imposed on the

population during the 1996-1999 heyday of a "terrorist regime" was a culture and interpretation of Islam completely foreign to its inhabitants.

15. (C) Urbancic reiterated longstanding US concerns over Chechnya. Vagapov conceded that the GOR's strategy of counter-terrorism and restoration of reliable local organs was not without fault. But the end result, he stressed, was a republic whose leadership was energetically rehabilitating the economic, health, and educational spheres (with all children enrolled in school), and where NGOs were active. The threat from terrorist organizations remained, but it wasn't an imminent threat, although recent information indicated that terrorist acts may be on the rise.

Economic Growth as Impediment to Terrorist Appeal

16. (C) Urbancic asked Vagapov to specify the counterinsurgency tools that were most effective in quelling the violence in Chechnya, specifically the value of religious appeals, social programs, and economic investment. Vagapov explained that in Chechnya and the North Caucasus writ large, a minority of the population was attracted to the terrorist movement, but many law-abiding residents joined because of the economic benefits that they accrued, in the absence of legitimate employment. Speeding economic growth and increasing the well-being of the local population were critical factors in inhibiting the terrorist appeal and rooting out terrorist elements. "Only economic growth, prosperity, and the principles of civilized countries can stop terrorism," Vagapov summarized.

17. (C) As for Islam, Vagapov elaborated on the unique form of Islam that flourished in the North Caucasus, which was

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rooted in tradition. The ideology imported by Saudi adherents or by al-Qaida was alien to local practice and local religious leaders, who condemned the use of terrorism for political purposes.

18. (C) Vagapov welcomed cooperative efforts with European nations and the U.S. to combat terrorism. The destruction of terrorism would only be possible through concerted efforts that eradicated terrorism's roots.

Transitioning from Federal to Local Forces

19. (C) Urbancic questioned Vagapov on the importance of relying on local forces to fight insurgencies, and asked what advice Russia would extend to other countries battling insurgents. Vagapov rejected the term insurgents in the Russian context, emphasizing that "from the very beginning" Chechnya was a terrorist battlefield. With that clarification, Vagapov underscored the importance of shifting to local forces, noting that the GOR had quickly begun to form units of Chechnyan forces under the Ministry of Interior (MVD). Today, 95 percent of the forces were local, with only 15-16,000 MVD troops remaining. Four battalions -- the North, South, East, and West -- were fully Chechenized. The population welcomed this development and it helped encourage active opposition to the "independent republic" leadership, whose rule was never accepted by the local population. It was local Chechens who took up arms against Chechen terrorist leader Shamil Basayev.

110. (C) Vagapov stressed that it was much more efficient to rely upon local forces than on troops from around the country. Federal troops impart a sense of occupation, which is resisted. Generating a local backlash against terrorists is essential, and should be a lesson learned by other countries, regardless of the religious makeup of the population. Locals must be engaged and committed. In response to Urbancic's query on the tools used to elicit this

support, Vagapov stressed that in Chechnya there was a split in the population from the very beginning, with a majority never supporting the separatist aims and terrorist tactics of the leadership. The part of society that sought to remain within Russia expanded as the devastating consequences of the war spread. It was never necessary to bribe or subvert locals for their support.

¶11. (C) At the same time, military losses began to convince those who supported Chechen "President" Dzhokhar Dudayev and Basayev to realize the hopelessness of their cause and that terrorism was a "path to nowhere, a path to the destruction and death of the Chechen people." After the death of Chechen separatist leader Maskhadov (in 2005), many realized the futility of terrorism. The decision to amnesty former fighters and allow them to join the ranks of the MVD troops and receive salaries was an important tool to changing the hearts and minds.

¶12. (C) Vagapov encouraged Urbancic to return for further consultations, "anytime and anywhere," including in Grozny.

¶13. (C) Comment: As mentioned above, Vagapov presented the official view of the Chechen conflict. This view conflates separatist insurgents, who adhere to Chechnya's traditional forms of religion, and Jihadist Islamists, who imported wahhabism and fought not for Chechnya but for pan-Islamic umma. This view labels all of them terrorists. End Comment.

¶14. (U) Deputy S/CT Frank Urbancic has cleared this cable.
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